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SAVOR

BOSTON'S CULINARY RENAISSANCE

...lement, The Boston Phoenix, January 29, 1980

The Ultimate

DISCOTHEQUE

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Cover photo by Lou Goodman. The chefs, clockwise from lower left, are: Robert Platner, Bruce Frankel, Moncef Meddeb, Lydia Shire, David Coltin, and Sue Small.

SAVOR

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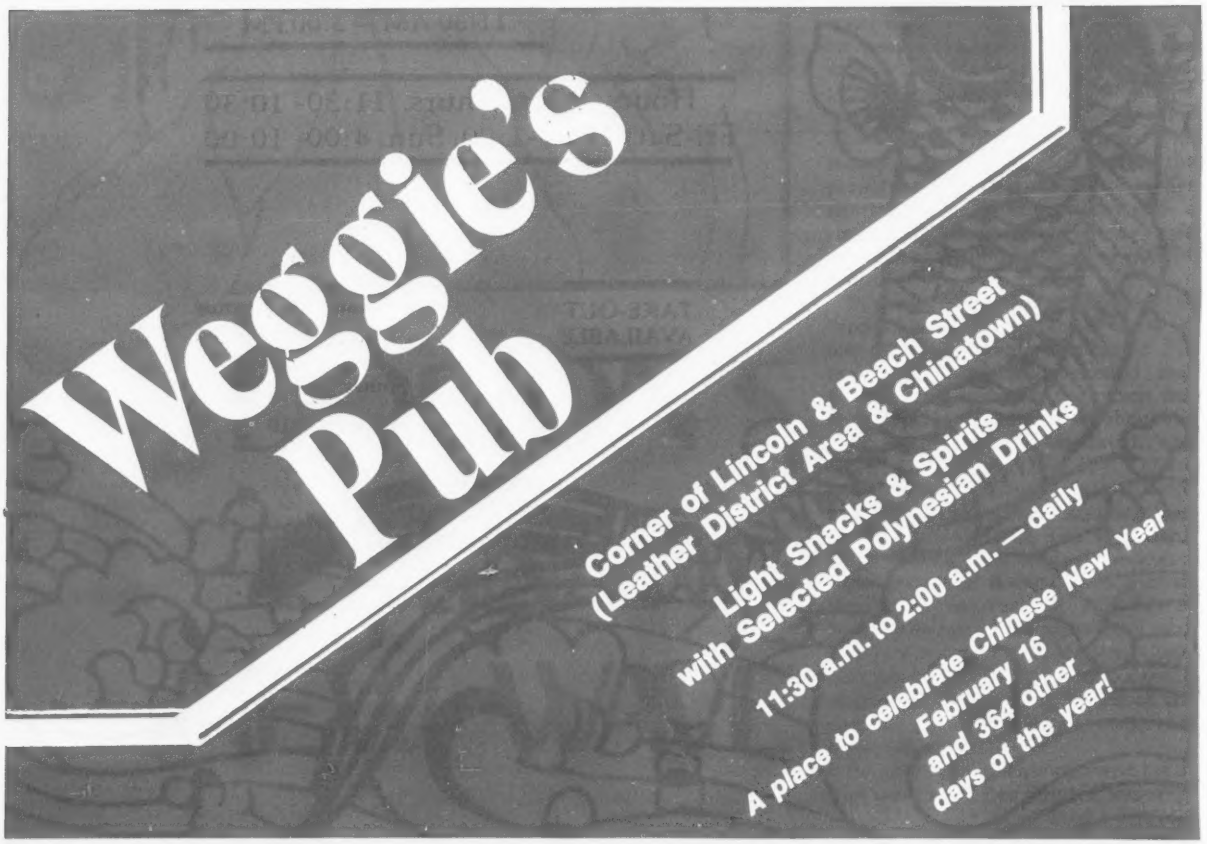
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Illustration by Michael Compton

boston's culinary new wave

by John David Ober

As if in single file, a number of new chefs have stolen upon the local scene within the last few years. Less attention has been aroused than might have been expected, and the collective result of their individual labors does not yet constitute a *coup* or a revolution, but at the very least these young men and women have drastically improved the odds of finding a good meal in Boston. If given a chance, they may alter the city's lackluster culinary reputation.

Although Beantown was never the restaurant Sahara it was (and is) alleged to be, there's no denying that very little change occurred in recent decades. Some of the *grandes dames* grew a little tarnished; in many of the older establishments, the menus were written as if seasonal changes — in the market and the weather — were of no concern. If Boston restaurants ever served regional New England fare, that fact was before my time (or beyond my ken). Even the ignoble baked bean has practically vanished from local menus.

The chefs who appear in this representative sampling were quick to point out that their talents and successes owe a considerable debt to an earlier wave of local practitioners who were pioneers in introducing lighter styles of cooking, novel combinations of seasonal ingredients, and new techniques for preparing vegetables, meats, and sauces. In many cases, the new generation's chefs actually studied with or worked under the aegis of the old's. The current renaissance, then, is in reality a second *nouvelle vague*, the perpetuation and expansion of earlier efforts to give Boston restaurants a standing commensurate with the city's stellar reputation in education and the arts.

In conversation with members of the "second new wave," many of the same names were frequently mentioned. For example, Sue Small suggested that much of the credit for the recent improvement in restaurant fare should be given to three women who taught and toiled a decade or less ago: Odette Bery, who ran the Turtle Cafe, in Cambridge, before opening Another Season, on Beacon Hill, two years ago; Sally Scoville, the original proprietor and cook at Le Bocage in its earliest Cambridge incarnation; and Madeleine Kamman, the tempestuous guru and proprietor of the Modern Gourmet, which she recently sold to a group of investors. Several members of the current crop of talented cooks are Kamman students.

Another name mentioned with gratitude was that of Leo Romero, who orig-

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inated and ran Cafe L'Ananas in its halcyon days. (He now runs Casa Romero, in the Back Bay; for a time, he also had a hand in Hermitage, at the Institute of Contemporary Art.)

As prices soar, many of the new wave have elected to open small, boutique operations in lieu of the elaborate and elegant palaces that were commonplace in earlier eras. While a limited seating capacity is by no means a guarantee of quality in and of itself, it does give a restaurateur more freedom in planning meals and in utilizing what is freshest on the market. Of course, smallness also poses a serious economic hazard for the restaurant owner: in particular, he or she must depend on the good faith of those who make reservations both to keep them and to arrive on time. (Moncef Meddeb of L'Espalier was emphatic on this point: "While any restaurant is hurt by an inconsiderate party that fails to keep an appointment, large restaurants are better able to absorb the loss, or fill the table with people who walk in, than small ones. For us it is a matter of life and death: if the public wants the new wave to survive, then it will have to become more conscientious in making and keeping reservations.")

Apart from small size and limited seating, what are some of the other distinguishing characteristics of the boutique restaurants owned and managed by the new chefs? Generally, the quality of the food takes precedence over all else, meaning that location and decoration in particular assume less importance than they used to. Some of these restaurants occupy storefronts in low-rent neighborhoods; others fill cellar space in apartment buildings, or second-story quarters in commerical properties.

Most of the chefs in the *nouvelle vague* lean toward some form of *nouvelle cuisine*: sauces are made by deglazing and reduction and with enrichment butter rather than with flour or other starch; unusual ingredients often show up in novel and surprising combinations (smoked sturgeon with sauteed breast of duck, for example, or poached haddock with oysters and sorrel). Menus are brief, usually written by hand and changed frequently, if not daily. They inevitably reflect the idiosyncratic, creative thinking of each chef, but also the seasonal and daily changes in the market. Food may be lighter in warm weather, heartier when it is cold outside.

Not surprisingly, many of the new restaurateurs rely on the same quality purveyors for their raw ingredients: meats come from John Dewar & Company of Newton Centre, butter from Hovey's, seafood from Sanborn's (in spite of a devastating December fire).

As I spoke with the eight chefs celebrated here, two things became abundantly clear. First, each of them is intelligent and articulate. And second, these are people who are passionately devoted to what they are doing, men and women who care about food and its pleasures. They are in the restaurant business because they want to be. As Edmond DiStasi put it, "God knows there are easier ways to make a living."

Here, then, are their portraits. Meet the second *nouvelle vague.*

David Coltin

Allegro, 458 Moody Street, Waltham; 891-5486.

The chef and owner of Allegro says he has been a restaurant junkie as long as he can remember. His family lived in Auburn, Maine, but frequently traveled to New York on business — and for the pleasure of dining out. David Coltin's love of Italian food comes from several sources: his

father spent time in Italy during the war, and often cooked at home using fresh vegetables from a nearby farm and fish off the boat in Portland.

While Coltin was doing many of the things that young people did in the dull '70s (*e.g.*, driving a cab and going to school — he has a master's degree in English literature, "for what it's worth"), his friend, now wife, Lillian, was studying Italian cooking under Roberta Dowling, who is currently president of Cambridge's De Gustibus cooking school, but was then an instructor at Madeleine Kamman's Modern Gourmet. One day Lillian made and brought home a *risotto* with truffles, and Coltin says that tasting it was not unlike what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. Soon Coltin himself enrolled in classes at Modern Gourmet, where he remained for nine months, "about five of which were productive," he says.

"It is true that I was an arrogant kid, and I have never questioned Kamman's abilities as a cook, but her courses became increasingly diluted and filled with political nonsense and vindictiveness. She and I didn't exactly hit it off."

After his time at Modern Gourmet, Coltin worked briefly for the Pritzkers at Dodin-Bouffant. While he admired Robert Pritzker's talent, Coltin (like many others) found the atmosphere in the kitchen intolerably tense and unfriendly.

Coltin worked at seven different cooking jobs around town and spent time in Italy before he and Lillian decided to open their own place. After an arduous search in Boston, Cambridge, Watertown, and Atlanta, they finally settled on the present site in Waltham, a storefront simply and attractively decorated by the Coltins and a friend, Jim Crissman.

"Why Italian food?" I asked.

"Because," Coltin replied, "we felt that we could not get Italian food in Boston comparable to the fare we had grown accustomed to in New York and Italy. Not that we viewed ourselves as experts, mind you. But we thought we could produce better fare — simple food in the styles of northern Italy, using the finest ingredients available."

The Coltins explained that Italian cooking has not undergone a drastic change comparable to *nouvelle cuisine* in France. "Italian food tends to be more static and traditional," thinks David Coltin. For that very reason they are convinced that the knowledge and application of French discipline and technique to Italian ingredients and recipes offers an ideal antidote to the hit-or-miss approach of much Italian cooking.

"Especially when you are dealing with items like garlic and oil, it is important to measure, to arrive at the proper proportion instead of throwing it in the pot," David says. The Coltins have but one immediate goal: "To make Allegro even better and more consistent than it is."

Edmond DiStasi

Front Street, 260 Berkeley Street, Boston, 247-0011.

"What cooking school?" asked Edmond DiStasi, an owner and the chief cook at Front Street. "Where would one go except to those factories in New York State that churn out automatons, some of whom can do butter carvings and others of whom can do ice carvings?"

According to DiStasi, many chefs who teach in cooking schools are second-rate cooks at the outset; they grow stagnant because of their lack of contact with the real world of food and become paranoid for fear that some of their students will outshine them. "And that is exactly what has happened in a certain case locally," DiStasi says with an enigmatic smile and no elaboration.

Edmond DiStasi cannot remember a period in his life

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Photo by Lou Goodman

Photos by Stuart Rosner

In the pastry kitchen

COOKS' TOUR

WHO IS TRAINING THE THE NEW CHEFS OF BOSTON?

by Sheryl Julian

About 20 students, all in their teens or early 20s, are working at long stainless-steel stove counters in the sauce kitchen at the Johnson & Wales Culinary Arts Division. In all, the college has more than a dozen kitchens and an enrollment of more than a thousand chefs-in-training. Each of the 20 students here is making a two-yolk bearnaise. When the last melted butter has been whisked onto the yolks, the sauces are presented to Chef Michael McGuire, who tastes each and grades it on a scale of from one to 10.

A young woman, her white neckerchief damp with sweat in the steamy heat, offers her sauce to McGuire.

"Needs more taste," he says. "You should have reduced the vinegar more."

"But I reduced it so much there was hardly any left in the pan," the student answers.

"Then you didn't have enough of a reduction left to give the sauce what it needs." He marks an "eight" next to her name. She returns to her electric burner and wipes all around it so the steel shines, a gesture everyone in the kitchen makes frequently.

This is the class that supplies the stocks and sauces to other kitchens throughout the school. Two students are straining a huge quantity of bechamel through a sieve. Beside them are simmering vats of chicken and beef stock and two kinds of consomme. Stock pots of tomato sauce are also cooking, and *espagnole* sauce is ready to be left simmering overnight. By the time all the bearnaises are finished and the stocks may be left alone, it is lunchtime. The second-year chefs-in-training are free to eat and leave for the day.

Johnson & Wales is a small private college in Providence, Rhode Island, offering training in many fields, including accounting, hotel management, fashion merchandising, retailing, business administration, and food-service management. Its Culinary Division opened six years ago, with the support of David Friedman, who started the Dunkin' Donuts chain. The David Friedman Center, the division's headquarters, is separate from the main downtown campus and occupies what used to be a military center. According to a spokesman for the college, when the school decided to establish a culinary program, an instructor was sent by the Culinary Institute of America, in Hyde Park, New York — the largest school of its kind in the country (and now Johnson & Wales's only competition) — to draft the J&W curriculum. The kitchens were built sparing no expense. Dem-

Right, Chef Aptheker demonstrates a decoration technique in the bake shop; below, preparing a cold buffet in garde-manger *class.*

onstration rooms have closed-circuit color TV so students can study detail work at monitors on the walls. Miles of clean stainless steel fill kitchens more spacious and well-equipped than those of most restaurants.

The programs in the Culinary Division were designed so that students can work in restaurants during their two-year stay. The school is closed on Fridays, and the classes are held in blocks: early morning until noon, all afternoon, or late afternoon through evening. Although students are required to accumulate only 600 working hours (or about half a year of half-time work) before earning Associate in Science degrees, many take advantage of the schedule and hold steady part-time jobs.

By the time students finish their second year, most have been waiters, bartenders, bakers, and cooks, and have had experience with a range of international cuisines. They have taken courses in nutrition, menu planning, meat cutting, ordering kitchen supplies, and cooking in a cafeteria. Johnson & Wales graduates have done two years of "hands-on work," including internships in the kitchen, dining rooms, and banquet halls at Warwick's Rhode Island Inn, whose dining facilities are staffed entirely by chefs-in-training and their teachers. And while still attending school, some students work three-day weekends in Boston; after graduation some will find permanent work here.

Since everyone in the kitchens at Johnson & Wales wears the traditional whites, it is hard to tell an instructor from a student unless you know that the teachers are the ones wearing blue-checked trousers. First-year students wear blue, rather than white, neckerchiefs, so they stand apart from the second-year people.

The second-year students in the classical pastry shop have just

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completed *beignets souffles*, buttercream frosting, petits fours, baked Alaska, caramel custard, *sabayon* sauce, and pound cake. The two instructors, a Lebanese and an Israeli working alongside each other at marble slabs, are showing students how to make flowers from tinted almond paste. "We can only give them an idea," says Lebanese chef Charbel Shweiri. Shweiri won first prize in the professional category at the culinary art show in New York last November, and his impressive cakes are displayed in cases around the school. The students spend only a week in his course. "This school graduates cooks, not bakers," he says.

Several doors away, Chef Joseph Gagne is teaching advanced bake shop. Tall trolleys hold puff-pastry turnovers from the previous day's class ("made with puff-pastry shortening, which will never melt on the hottest day of the year"). Gagne turns out one of a number of very large chocolate sheet cakes — made with liquid shortening, he explains — onto brown paper. He rolls it up with what looks like whipped cream, wraps it in the paper seam-side down, and instructs the students to roll the others and leave them overnight at room temperature. The students fill their cakes, some of them using a clear yellow, jellied concoction that comes out of a large plastic container marked "lemon royale." Gagne points out the giant, baker's revolving oven along one wall. The oven's four shelves can each hold 50 pound cakes. The phone-booth-like stainless-steel "proofing boxes" in the corner, for rising bread, can rise two trolleys' worth, in a moisture- and heat-controlled atmosphere, he explains. "I want to pass on my recipes," says Gagne. "I'm not one of those chefs who is going to die with them." He smiles as the lemon royale is smoothed over the liquid-shortening chocolate cakes

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Stuart Rosner

Measure by measure: in the pastry kitchen

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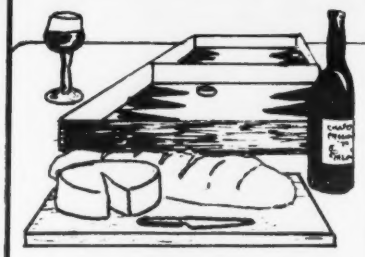

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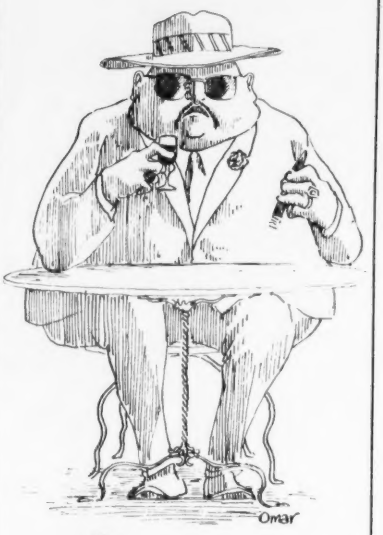

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on the table behind him.

Down the hall, Chef Bill Calore, whose Italian kitchen is adjacent to the dining room, has set up a simulated restaurant. As the class watches and evaluates two fellow students who are "working the line" (manning the stoves), Johnson & Wales students and faculty are ordering lunch from student waiters in black trousers and tight, waist-length jackets. A waiter enters the kitchen with an order, which Calore checks (and corrects), and hands it to an expediter who calls it out to the cooks. Immediately, the student in charge of the entrees starts preparing the plate, which is quickly handed to a student at the stove with the vegetables. When the expediter signals that the order is ready, the waiter picks up the tray ("Get underneath it and bend at the knees," instructs Calore) and heads for the dining hall. Calore coaches gently: "Keep checking your food; keep the pace up; waiters, do your tables need more water? More bread? Whose side of pasta is this?" And suddenly, as quickly as the service began, everyone in the hall has finished ordering, the cooks clean up, and class is dismissed.

Chef Edward Flattery teaches *garde-manger*, those dishes that make up a cold buffet. In Flattery's kitchen, students make ice sculptures and learn how to transpose a turnip slice and some leek stems into a lifelike flower. He and his students prepare a buffet for 160 people every six days, and each one has an ice-sculpture centerpiece and food that looks almost too perfect. In one corner of the room, several students are chipping away at a giant ice sleigh that will accent the English Christmas theme of the week's buffet. The menu will include a whole salmon decorated with a chaudfroid sauce, smoked beef tongue, cold prime ribs of beef, fruit-glazed baked ham, marinated salads, and cold pate *en croute*, which the chef is decorating with a giant pastry rose. He is working carefully and quickly, calling out for students to bring him fluted cutters and paring knives to make the pastry cut-outs on the top crust perfect and symmetrical. The lights in the kitchen flicker, and the students and chef, concentrating on the decorations, hardly notice. Then suddenly, the school's power has failed and the room is dark. Flattery instructs a student to open the emergency exit; light floods into one side of the room. "The pate needs an hour and a half. Someone get it in the oven; be sure there's a pan underneath. Watch that it browns evenly. What else needs to be done?" And the class picks up the beat in the dim light as though nothing has happened to interrupt its work. □

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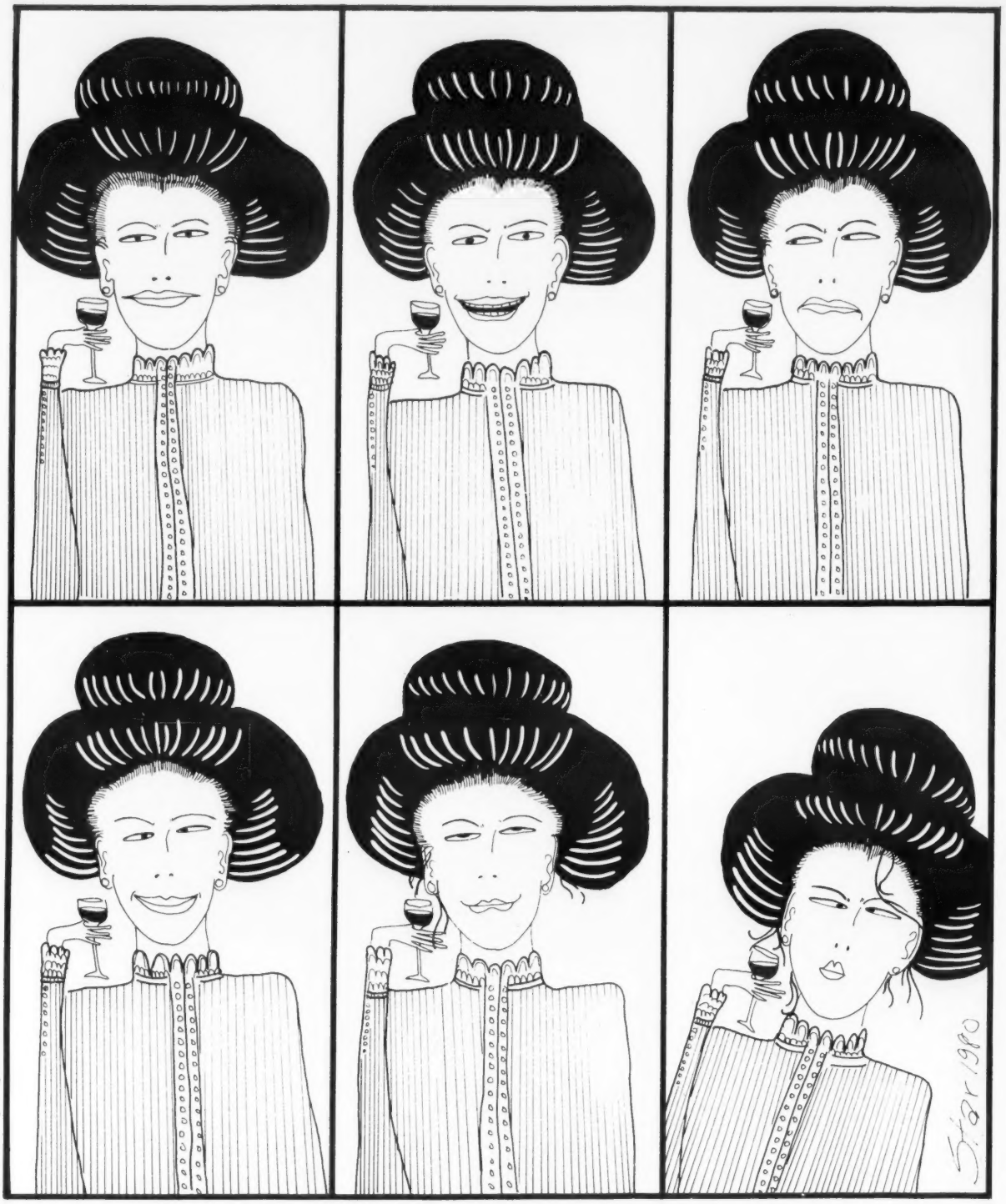

Illustration by Stephen Star

a commoners' guide to wine tastings

Sipping

by Michael Apstein

For most people, the mention of a wine-tasting conjures images of stuffy gents overdressed for most any occasion exchanging snobbish comments like "hmm, a nose of freshly picked blackberries" or "too much tannin for the fragile fruit." No doubt it happens, but the practice of gathering a few friends to sample and compare a selection of wines doesn't have to be a way of life. In fact, wine-tastings can be a good way to entertain informally and an excellent way to learn about wines without spending a fortune.

The practical side of wine-tastings is that they let you compare several products at once, focusing on their individual characteristics. This *modus operandi* is much easier than trying to recall the attributes of something you drank last week with dinner, never mind how it compares with other wines.

What follows, then, are some general suggestions for organizing a wine-tasting at home, plus some specific recommendations for a sampling of California red wines.

Plan to taste six to eight wines — averaging one bottle per person invited. Taste more than that, and most people won't be able to keep their samples straight. Your selection of wines should share some common denominator as opposed to being randomly plucked from the liquor store's shelf. That is, I would not want to compare a sweet dessert wine, a California red, a French white, and a Chianti at the same sitting. However, wines from any *one* of these categories would make an interesting tasting. When starting to learn about wine, you should choose general categories within which to compare, and then narrow the range of difference as you gain experience. For example, to start, you might want to select several California red wines: a Zinfandel, a Pinot Noir, a Cabernet Sauvignon, a Petite Sirah, a Gamay, and a blended red (more specific suggestions are made below). Later, you may want to compare eight Zinfandels.

Since most of us don't have 60 or 70 glasses at home, you could just give each person one glass and have him wipe it out between wines. At larger, more formal, tastings, the wine is either passed around the table at which the guests are seated or poured for them. However, for a casual, home tasting you can just set the wines out around the table and let your friends help themselves. Some people wrap the wine bottles in foil so the tasting is "blind." Only after everyone has tasted all the wines is the foil removed to reveal the names of the wines. This is probably unnecessary for an informal tasting, unless you are serving prestigious wines and don't want to be influenced by the labels. You should not, however, discuss the prices, at least until all the wines have been tasted.

Put out some French bread cut into pieces (count on half a loaf per person) so each taster can "clean the palate" or get the taste of one wine out of his mouth before tasting the next one. Some people like to include cheeses as well (I think they detract from the taste of the wines); you should certainly avoid blue-veined and strongly flavored cheeses such as Gorgonzola, Stilton, and Jetost, which will overpower and mask the taste of the wines. After all, this is a wine-tasting, not a cheese-tasting.

What else will you need? A couple of bottles or pitchers of water are probably a good idea. Also, you may want to provide pencils and three-by-five cards for those who'd like to take notes.

Ah, there's the rub — how to describe a wine without resorting to the "unassuming little nose" vocabulary. There is really no magic to describing wine. To start, concentrate on wine's three most obvious characteristics — color, smell, and taste. Is the red wine a deep, opaque ruby-color, characteristic of heavy, robust wines, or is it a lighter red (bordering on rose), often the mark of lighter-tasting wines? Frequently, very young red wines will appear slightly purple, while older ones may actually have a brown tinge.

I think most people find the smell or "bouquet" of wine the most esoteric part of tasting. Again, to start, resort to broad, basic descriptions. Does the wine have *any* smell? Is it immediately apparent or very distant? Although a particular aroma may be impossible to identify precisely without practice, most people will have an opinion about whether it is appealing or vaguely unpleasant. It would be impossible to try to list all the possible smells of wine. What's most helpful to concentrate on and be aware of when smelling a wine is whether it reminds you of anything. If the wine doesn't seem to you to have a distinctive bouquet, don't agonize over it, but go on and taste it.

Since most wine is made from grapes, it logically will exhibit the flavors of a particular fruit and sometimes flavors from the soil in which the grapes were grown. During fermentation, as a wine's natural sugars are converted to alcohol, various acids that give wine its sourness (and sometimes its unpleasant harshness) are formed. Sugar that remains after fermentation has stopped can give the wine some sweetness. As a result, wine may have a number of tastes ("complex wine") or one predominant flavor ("simple wine"). The intensity of these flavors gives rise to descriptions as "light" or "robust, heavy." The taste that remains in your mouth after swallowing is called the "finish" and may be "short" or "long" depending on how long it persists.

There are no rules for describing wine; each person should use words or phrases that will allow him to remember particular qualities of specific

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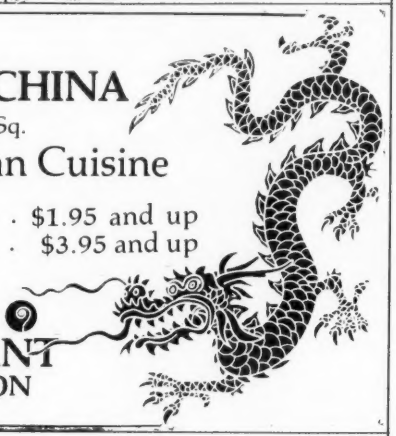

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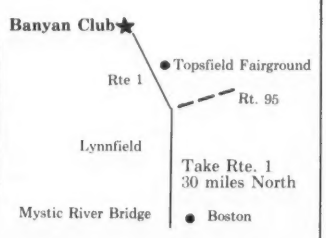

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samples, for comparison with other wines. As the evening progresses and the sensory apparatus is blurred by alcohol, tasting notes frequently become briefer, often reduced to statements like, "This one tastes good too."

* * *

To demonstrate the range of California red wines, I've chosen six varietals (wine made primarily from one variety of grape) and one blend. Because each but the first two of these is made from a different grape, each will have a distinct taste, allowing a beginner to recognize differences across the spectrum of California wines easily. All of these wines are available at Macy's in Allston at prices of from $3 to $5.50, but there are other excellent wine shops around town that have broad California selections as well — the Wine Cask, Somerville; Harvard Wine and Liquor, Brookline; the Winecellar of Silene, Waltham; to name but a few.

The choice of two Cabernet Sauvignons (Fetzer 1976 Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon, $5.49, and Fetzer 1975 Cabernet Sauvignon, $4.79) will show you if there is, in fact, a difference between the two and whether it is worth the difference in price. The cabernet sauvignon is the primary grape variety used in red Bordeaux wine and has been grown very successfully in California. Next is a wine from a zinfandel, a grape variety with no counterpart in Europe (Charles Krug 1975 Zinfandel, $3.89). An example of the product of the pinot noir, the primary grape of French Burgundy, is Beaulieu Vineyard 1974 Pinot Noir, $4.99. Wine made from the petite sirah grape resembles the hearty wines of the Rhone Valley of France, and a suitable representative is Mirrasou 1975 Petite Sirah at $3.99. To round out the varietals in this tasting is a gamay, the grape of French Beaujolais (Robert Mondavi 1976 Napa Gamay, $4.99). For a non-varietal or blended wine, I would include the Franciscan California Burgundy Cask 317 (no relation to a French Burgundy), $2.99, which was well-received at a recent tasting of inexpensive red wines.

* * *

For people who want to participate in wine-tastings but don't want to organize their own, here are two likely contacts: Myron Norman, of Harvard Wine and Liquor (277-9000), who runs the local chapter of *Les Amis du Vin*, a national wine organization, which holds tastings once every four to six weeks; and the Winecellar of Silene (890-2121), which sponsors two weekly series of tastings — one for people with no previous experience and one for people with some background — from November through April. □

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chili today

by Barbara Wallraff

Until a few years ago, a woman's opinion about chili recipes carried about as much authority as a Norwegian's. At least such was the case where it counts — in Texas. If not documentably the birthplace of the dish, our Lone Star state was uncontestably the home of chili fanaticism until 1975, when the International Chili Society moved its headquarters from Terlingua, Texas, to Rosamond, California. But the annual Terlingua Chili Cook-Off goes on, and the winner of this prestigious contest earns the title of World Champion Chili-Maker. The pre-eminence of the Terlingua competition is maintained, in part, by a requirement that entrants have claimed a ribbon already, from some previous cook-off.

And there was the rub for women. Traditionally barred from chili cook-offs ("let them bake cake"), they had no chance to compete for the title, let alone win it. That is, until the Hell Hath No Fury Susan B. Anthony Memorial Women's Chili Cooking Group was founded. This organization sponsored the first all-women chili cook-off, held in Luckenbach, Texas. It also lobbied successfully for member Allegani Jani Schofield, of Houston, to be admitted to the 1971 Terlingua competition. Schofield wore hot pants as she made history by being the first female contestant, and she garnered much unofficial praise for her cooking as well as her costume. But she didn't win. Schofield next competed at Terlingua in 1974, when she was legitimately eligible, having been awarded second place in that year's Carry A. Nation Memorial Cook-Off. That year she won, becoming the first woman World Champion Chili-Maker. Her recipe calls for, among other things, a little cornstarch, a shot of Pearl beer, and some typically Mexican ingredients, such as coriander, *mole* paste, and masa flour. The hot spices in Schofield's concoction total about six tablespoonfuls per batch, and the recipe goes by the name of "Hot Pants Chili." "Hot Pants Beans" — mildly flavored pintos — are served separately, Texas-style.

Schofield's isn't the only prize-winning chili with some of those ingredients, even the beer. Wood's Undenia-Bull World Championship Chili includes a dash of light beer, and won the International Chili Society's championship for C.V. Wood Jr. two years in a row, before he stepped aside to become the contest's chief tasting judge. His dish features a few still more startling elements: beef-kidney suet, monosodium glutamate, chicken broth, grated cheese, and lime juice. The finished chili contains no beans and is served with oyster crackers.

Other entrants included chili recipes endorsed, if not created, by famous Westerners; "authentic" concoctions by regionally prominent Tex-Mex chefs; and chili "translations" for palates unfamiliar with the Tex-Mex culinary idiom (and grocery-shoppers who don't know where to buy *mole* paste). Lady Bird Johnson lends her name to a chili recipe that seems quite unremarkable once you're used to Texas-style chili, with which beans are served on the side. Senator and Mrs. Barry Goldwater, however, favor a recipe for "Arizona Ranch-Style Frijoles" — pinto beans with canned taco sauce, etc. — that they say can be used to make *chile con carne* by just adding chopped beef and an onion. Another celebrity concoction achieves individuality with a dash of cocoa powder, and "authentic" dishes feature venison, mutton, parsley, marjoram, butter, or olives. One creepy-sounding recipe, for "South-of-the-Border" chili, created by a far-north-of-the-border chef who's published more than one cookbook, specifies cream-of-chicken soup, diced veal, processed American cheese, and paprika.

In most cases, *gracias a Dios*, the eccentric ingredients are mere additives, and their flavors are overpowered by chili's basics. Research discloses these nearly universal ingredients to be: meat (ground or chopped beef and/or pork), tomatoes, onions, garlic, cumin, oregano, salt, pepper, chili powder, hot sauce (or cayenne pepper or ground hot peppers), and often green peppers and sugar. Beans — kidney, pinto, or others unspecified — almost invariably appear in a chili feast somewhere; they're either added to the pot or treated as a side dish, depending on whether the chef has pledged allegiance to the Lone Star flag.

So much for the heights and the superstars of the chili world. Chili-making isn't only a glamorous, public activity; it's also a humble, private one. Obviously, chili is a folk dish, for which there's no single correct recipe (as there is, say, for oysters Rockefeller, which can be confidently judged right or wrong on any count, down to the last dash of white pepper).

Chili's variability is both its blessing and its curse. On the one hand, when preparing it, you can feel free to be creative, to test its limits. Just be sure to give any really inspired version (such as tuna chili with Spanish olives, honey, and capers) an impressive name (such as *Chile Cristobal Colon en Barco* — that means Christopher Columbus in a boat) to disguise the exact nature of its waywardness from those who will be eating it. On the other hand, you'll never be able to rest satisfied that you've made the Perfect Chili. When you like it, someone else will say it needs more onions, or a dash of cinnamon; or some chili purist of one narrow persuasion or another may refuse to recognize it as chili at all. Chili's mixed blessing is that when you're served someone else's recipe, there's no telling what's in it — particularly if the chef has named it well.

Chili is just one of life's opportunities for learning. I guess. My own enthusiasm for the subject was lukewarm throughout my childhood in Arizona — when I ate a bland, homemade version for dinner on alternate Tuesdays. Once out in the world, though, I met thick and fast with personal revelations regarding chili, and these have shaped me into an avid (if inconsistent) chili cook, consumer, and kibitzer.

The first revelation occurred in San Francisco, around the time (unbeknownst to me) of the founding of the Hell Hath

Continued on page 20

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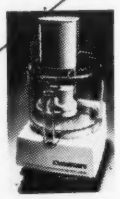

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No Fury Susan B. Anthony Memorial Women's Chili Cooking Group. While that was coming together in Texas, I was briefly at loose ends in the land of Rice-A-Roni. There, in the shadow of the Jack Tar Hotel, I happened on a colorful little shoebox of a restaurant, Tommy's Joynt. This memorable spot is renowned mostly for its buffalo stew, made with meat from government-surplus buffaloes. However, some swear by Tommy's turkey chili, and I tried that. As I downed a spicy, soupy bowlful, Revelation#1 hit home: chili doesn't require hamburger.

A little while later, I returned to college, where I was to live in a new house with new roommates. We found that the previous group of student tenants had thoughtfully left the refrigerator stocked with their surplus, including some heavily frosted, unidentifiable parcels of meat in the freezer compartment. A gleam in my eye, I suggested to my roommates, "Let's make chili." It was fine, and this confirmed Revelation #2: whatever it is, it's good in chili.

I don't know exactly when — to be sure, it was during a stretch when I was on a spare budget and cooking on a hot plate — I was blessed with Revelation #3: canned chili is more palatable when served over chow-mein noodles. But never mind. I'd rather gloss over that one; it's true, but hardly worth bragging about.

I was certainly at a New Year's Eve costume party in New York for my next chili thunderbolt. The host, whose reputation for good living extended even to his chili and his walloping liquid punch, occasioned this, Revelation #4: chili doesn't require any meat whatsoever. The stuff he set out in a big crock looked like semi-nude pinto beans. But it tasted fiery and spicy and, well, like chili. It was a daring match for the punch, which was about six parts mixed hard liquor and one part orange juice, and tasted fiery and spicy and, well, like the killer it was.

A New Year's or two later, I had my own party. Plenty of tequila and rum flowed, and a vast vat of very miscellaneous chili — chorizo, bacon, red and pinto beans, cinnamon, brown sugar, and all — simmered on the stove. My brother was there. I said, "You have to try this. It's not like that namby-pamby stuff we had when we were kids." He said, "Gee, you didn't put beans in it, I hope." And there was Revelation #5: chili pleases some of the people some of the time.

And any time your chili doesn't please all of the people, take heart in Revelation #6 (I gloried in it the day after the party): heaven hath no delight like chili scorned and therefore left over. □

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on the trail

by Norman Boucher

In many ways, the Mad River Valley in the Green Mountains of Vermont typifies for me the ugly commercialization that downhill skiing can bring (along with jobs, I know) to a rural area. Along every paved road now are row after row of restaurants, discos, and condominiums; even in winter, one sees bulldozers sitting in half-cleared openings waiting for warmer weather, when they can continue ravaging the woods. The residents of the Mad River Valley, like those in most of Vermont's ski country, are divided between natives and newcomers, and there is little socializing between the groups. Typically, the natives work the ski lifts and the bulldozers, while the newcomers are architects and real-estate people. And with the energetic real-estate types come fast housing and a bland, if opulent, uniformity — a kind of "condoformity." The owners of the Sugarbush Ski Area, for example, have been trying of late to plaster the word "Sugarbush" everywhere. The Glen Ellen Ski Area has recently been renamed Sugarbush North. Then there's Sugarbush Inn, Sugarbush Club, Sugarbush Village, the Warren Sugarbush Airport. Last summer, the owners of the resort, determined to recast the valley itself into their own image, promised to pay half the cost to any local merchant who would erect a sign advertising his or her own business — as long as the sign specified that the business was located in "Sugarbush Valley." But the natives wouldn't go along. This was the Mad River Valley, they said, and always had been. Few merchants accepted the developer's offer, but the victory seemed small and more symbolic than significant.

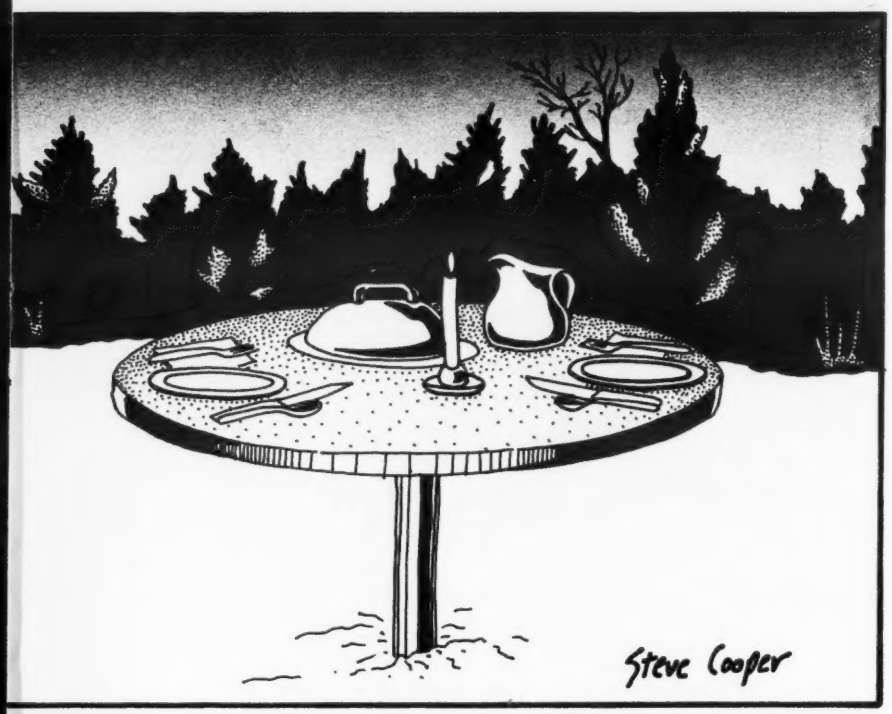
C'est la vie. Yet for those who wish to avoid the commercialism and still enjoy the winter woods, there still may be an alternative of sorts in the Mad River Valley — cross-country skiing. Whereas a day's lift ticket at Sugarbush will cost almost $20, a mere $2.75 will buy a day of skiing on a wide network of cross-country trails, provided you own your own skis. (Rentals run about $7.50 a day.) In Warren, the center of the Mad River Valley, there are now three cross-country centers, which maintain more than a hundred miles of trails, some groomed and some left wild.

What's more, cross-country skiing there can take you away from the overpriced restaurants and lead you to a weathered gray home with red trim that sits high on a hill at the edge of the woods. Unadvertised, with only an all-but-invisible blue sign that says "cross-country lunch" nailed to a nearby tree, this house offers a warm fire, good conversation, two individuals who are a relief from Sugarbush homogeneity, and, best of all, a delicious yet simple hot lunch.

" 'The valley's best-kept secret' used to be our slogan until it seemed every place around here was using that kind of thing," Charlie Goodwin told me one day in late December. He was stacking wood to dry by the fireplace. I was sitting at the long dining- and living-room table, looking out the sliding glass doors at downhill skiers on the long ridge of Lincoln Mountain. "But this place is deliberately hard to find. We don't want to clutter the woods up with signs."

"We try to be kind and pleasant," Jane Goodwin, Charlie's wife, added, as she sat down the table from me with a cup of coffee. "Most of the restaurants in the area tend to have fancy food. Maybe if the skiers have been going out every night, they're interested in eating more simple food."

Charlie and Jane Goodwin live in the house and, although they've been in the Mad River Valley for 10 years, are still considered "newcomers" in Vermont. (In their early 60s, they've managed to befriend natives as well as newcomers.) After Charlie retired as a junior-high-school English teacher in



Serve soup and the world will ski a path to your door

Garden City, Long Island, he and Jane, a former art teacher, bought this house on the hillside and moved into it. They traveled some, and read, but restlessness finally prompted them, in January of 1977, to make soup for the cross-country skiers who were using the nearby trails. Their effort was an immediate success. Those first skiers told other skiers who told other skiers, until the ski-touring center at the Sugarbush Inn extended one of its trails right to the Goodwins' door and called it "The Lunch Run." These days the only legitimate way to get to the "cross-country lunch place" is on skis or, sometimes, snowshoes.

Now, beginning right after Christmas, the Goodwins build their days around serving the lunch. Charlie rises early and, after breakfast, mops the hardwood floor in the combination dining/living room of their contemporary, lodge-style house. Then he cleans the two bathrooms. Meanwhile, Jane prepares three pots of soup and two loaves of bread, as she does every morning during ski season. Fruit is washed, cheese cut. When the table is set and the soup simmering, they are ready to greet the first skiers, up to 10 of which are liable to stop by on a weekday. Weekends are busier; occasionally a ski club will surprise them. Once they entertained 40 skiers at one time. At times like that, Charlie sneaks away to the store for more bread and cheese.

"Charlie PRs in the lunch room," said Jane, who usually stays in the kitchen serving the soup. "Sometimes he gets carried away."

Indeed. Exhibiting the same mischievous cynicism that made him a popular teacher in Garden City (popular with students, anyway), Charlie will sometimes watch skiers, unsure of themselves, stop and stare at the house. Seldom do they get away. Charlie bolts out the door and greets them, sometimes in Italian or French, and all but drags them inside. He pushes them into the kitchen, introduces the confused skiers to Jane, has them examine and taste the soups to decide which they want, then invites them to make themselves at home in the open main room, which, at its highest point beneath the sloping roof, is two-and-a-half stories tall. By this time, the skiers have removed their mittens, which Jane offers to throw into the clothes dryer, and are looking at the wooden balcony and loft that rise above them, admiring the unfinished wide boards and simple construction. "Isn't this a keen house?" Charlie asks them, inviting them to take a self-guided tour. The wood boards are as wide as they come, he may tell them; the balcony is made of crating from a coffin factory. "Isn't it great to see a couple of old people live in such a groovy house?" Charlie yells wryly after them.

Finally, lunch is served. The menu ranges from 50 cents for a cup of hot cider spiced with cinnamon and cloves to $4 for a Super Lunch (for those who want to "pig it," Charlie tells the skiers — his captive audience). Soup, imported cheeses, hot cider, freshly made bread, and fruit are all available in different combinations. The Ploughman's Lunch, for example, includes bread, cheese, and cider, while soup, bread, and cider make up the Mini Lunch.

The skiers eat at the table overlooking the outside deck and the Lincoln Mountain ridge, or they eat on the floor, or on the deck — anywhere they'd like, in fact. Some bring their own lunches and buy only hot cider. On the table, near a large bowl of fruit, is a cheese board with three or four types of cheese (Havarti and Jarlsberg on the snowless day that I was their only guest), including Fontina, Caerphilly, and Noekkelost.

"What I really wanted was peasant food," Jane told me, describing her

Continued on page 25

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Continued from page 23

lunches, "simple, natural food." She usually makes at least two different types of soup, which she refers to as the "white soup" and the "red soup." The white soup is usually a vegetable chowder (made with chicken broth), although the day I visited it was a creamy potato chowder with leeks and dill and sprinkled with crisp bacon. The red soup is usually tomato-based, a simple vegetable or minestrone concoction. For me, Jane had made a Black Forest soup, actually brown and not red. Hearty and filling, it contained sauerkraut, juniper berries, and chunks of stew beef together with vegetables.

"The bread is simple and crusty," she said. "It's called Cuban bread and is an Italian or French bread. Because I make it every day, I want a bread that's easy to make." Salted and unsalted butter are on the lunch table, she pointed out.

By the time the food is eaten, the skiers have caught on and made themselves at home. Emboldened by Charlie's wise-guy friendliness, many skiers sneak seconds or eat fruit they haven't paid for. No one seems to mind. Some people spread out on the floor or the couches and fall asleep. Others play games or pick out books from the bookcases around the house and settle down before the fire to read. Still other skiers sit back at the table and watch grosbeaks and nuthatches feed at the baskets of sunflower seeds and onion bags of suet hanging from the deck and the Christmas tree that stays there all season. All have climbed the hill on skis to get here, so no one is in a hurry to go. And no one is in a hurry to send them away.

Some people return year after year, and Charlie tries to greet them like old friends, although of course he sometimes calls them by the wrong names. The editor of *Yankee* magazine has skied up to the cross-country lunch place, as has an editor from *Bon Appetit* (who was so grateful he sent them a year's free subscription); a former Vermont Secretary of State makes it up two or three times a season. Before the guests go, Charlie runs after them — sometimes literally — with the guestbook. In it, I found names from 25 states, 10 countries, and three provinces of Canada. The skiers return to the touring center, where Bill Samuels, the manager, told me that most people thank him effusively for sending them the mile and a half up to Charlie's.

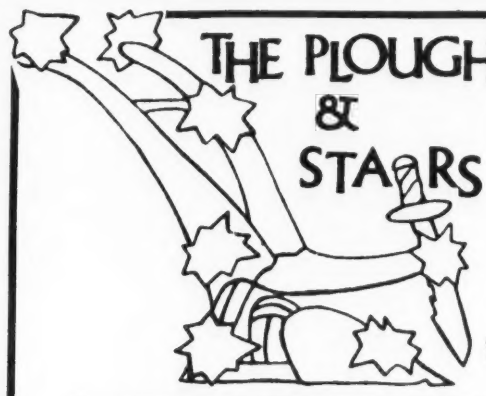
"We try to keep it a 'Come and have lunch with us' kind of thing," Charlie said. There is no cash register, no menu. When the skiers ask where to pay, Jane takes out an old dented strongbox. Whenever Charlie and Jane go to a movie or buy groceries during the ski season, they dip into the black box. Beyond that, Charlie says their profit is perhaps $200 a season. On a busy week, they buy up to $30 worth of cheese alone.

"We do it for fun. This is definitely *not* a money-making proposition," Charlie went on. "What this place really is is an ego trip for Jane and me. There's no point to us living here in winter without getting involved in the ski scene somehow," he observed. "People are funny, though. One time we had a fox run by in front of the deck and of course that caused a big stir. So I said maybe we should hire a fox to run by every day."

He laughed and went out to bring in more wood for tomorrow's lunch.

* * *

Directions: as the saying goes, "You can't get there from here." Clear directions would only spoil the adventure of reaching the Goodwins, who'd like to keep their place hard to find. Besides, the rule is that you've got to arrive on skis or snowshoes. Inquire about trails at the Rossignol Ski Touring Center at the Sugarbush Inn, just off Route 100 in Warren, Vermont. Call (802) 583-2301 and ask for the Ski Touring Center, ext. 273. □



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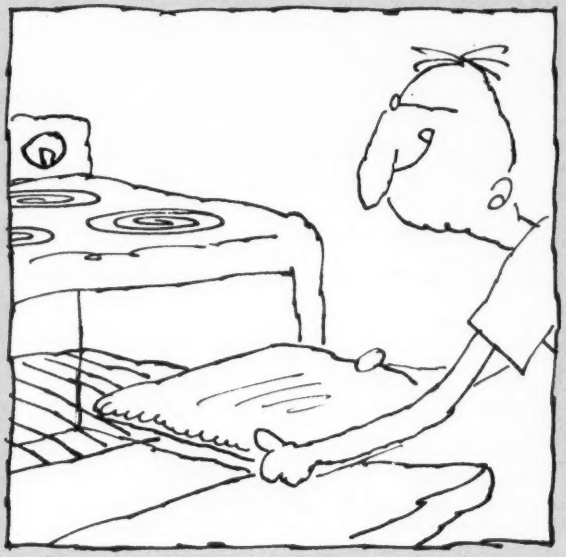

Illustration by Jim Carson

My week of TV dinners

Seven days that shook the palate

by D.C. Denison

They used to be called "TV dinners," which seemed apt for a number of reasons: (a) they generally tasted like the culinary equivalent of a two-hour *Love Boat*, (b) they could be prepared, eaten, and disposed of during the commercial breaks in a half-hour situation comedy, and (c) they actually tasted better if one ate them while paying *very* close attention to the show. During commercials, when concentration presumably lagged, they tasted awful.

TV and TV dinners were perfect for each other. But recently, purveyors of these heat-and-serve treats have been putting on airs, aspiring to upward mobility. The meals no longer answer to "TV dinner," or even to "frozen dinner." Now they are just "dinners" — right there in the same category as Mom's home cooking. These days, the only difference they own up to is a little "Keep Frozen" admonition in the corner of their wrappers.

Does sectioned-tinfoil cuisine, then, belong on the dining-room table instead of in front of the television set? Well, maybe. But to find out for sure, I spent seven days with some representative samples — warming them up, peeling the foil back, and wolfing them down. Below, a report.

Day one

Singles bars and bus stations are usually the best places to observe loneliness in its purest condition. But the people who frequent these spots cannot compete with the world-weary crowd picking over the offerings in a supermarket frozen-dinner showcase. There's no sadder sight than one of these hang-dog individuals languidly filling a shopping cart with frozen spaghetti-and-meatball dinners.

On my first visit (honest!) to these environs, I realized at once that I didn't care to be a part of this crowd. I quickly grabbed a Swanson's Sirloin Beef Dinner with "an exclu-

sive Blueberry Muffin" ($1.19) and headed for the checkout counter.

At home, I popped my prize in the oven and then, to complete the experience, turned on a double Mary Tyler Moore rerun. Thirty minutes later, between episodes, I pulled the dinner out, peeled back the foil, and began eating: the chopped sirloin was all right, the peas and carrots "in seasoned sauce" weren't bad, but the French fries were terrible — kind of raw and doughy-tasting. Then I realized my mistake: I hadn't peeled back the pieces of foil over the potatoes and dessert. I tried the "exclusive" muffin: it was doughy too. What does it indicate about one's cooking instincts, I thought, when it's too much even to peel back a few square inches of tinfoil? I didn't dwell on the depressing answer, and ate the potatoes and muffin anyway.

Overall, the meal wasn't great, but the Mary Tyler Moore episode was sufficiently diverting that I felt I'd definitely come out ahead.

Day two

It's been said that Swanson's new, larger dinners are named "Hungry-Man" because you have to be a desperately hungry man even to consider eating one. On my next trip to the frozen-dinner wasteland, I was real hungry, so I bought one: a Fried Chicken Dinner, "for the Hearty Appetite."

It was not the proper solution. The major problems were the chicken (gummy) and the "crinkle-cut" potatoes (soggy). True, the corn was good and the Apple-Raisin Cake Cobbler wasn't bad, but they were hardly enough. In fact, 10 minutes after finishing the Hungry-Man, I was back in the kitchen making a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich.

Day three

A friend of mine thinks that the bond that unites all TV-dinner-eaters is not loneliness, but laziness. She claims that two lazy married friends of hers frequently enjoy Hungry-Man dinners *together*, after work. Can one be sociable over a TV dinner? I purchased two Patio Mexican Frozen Dinners — a Beef Enchilada Dinner and a Mexican Style Combination Dinner — and brought them over to a friend's house for a comparison.

Maybe it was the companionship, but these two dinners actually tasted good. The refried beans tasted like real refried beans, the tamales tasted like real tamales, and the beef tacos tasted *almost* like real beef tacos — in my opinion, anyway. My dinner partner, who couldn't get over the fact that she was eating off an aluminum-foil tray, never really warmed to the experience. Nevertheless, hats off to Patio for making food that can survive the freezer.

Day four

The Chinese, apparently, haven't fared as well. The La Choy Chicken Chow Mein Dinner was a failure from the start: this five-course dinner (chicken chow mein, sweet-and-sour pork, fried rice, meat and shrimp egg rolls, and apple dessert rolls) was the only one that made me want to run when I peeled back the silver foil. It just didn't look convincing; in fact, the chow mein and the pork looked downright forbidding. And ultimately, none of the courses was worth the courage it took to eat it. In fairness, however, the rice was good, and the two dessert rolls — the only items that contained no monosodium glutamate — were fairly tasty. Ethnic TV dinners are a good idea; unfortunately, Chinese food seems to lose in the translation.

Day five

Maybe it was the whole idea of a TV breakfast that put me off from the start, but on the morning that I was to tackle Swanson's frozen French Toast with Sausages, I made sure that I had a spare breakfast around just in case. Actually, my reservations may have had more to do with the way the thing looked. I had learned, by this time, that most TV dinners looked good on the box and terrible in person. The Swanson TV breakfast looked bad on the *box*, so I was prepared for the worst.

When I finally put the package in the oven and saw that the frozen sausage and toast appeared permanently stiff and spiritless, I decided to eat my spare breakfast — a bagel and cream cheese — before I took the French toast out of the oven. When I did take it out, 25 minutes later, and it was still stiff and spiritless, I knew I'd made the right decision.

Day six

A Weight Watchers frozen dinner is obviously a high-rent commodity. For one thing, the box has a picture of the dinner served on an expensive plate instead of in its native tin. And the dinners themselves contain things like mushroom sauce, chopped cauliflower, and broccoli. To top it off, there is no dessert, which in TV dinners is like a newspaper without funny pages.

A Weight Watchers dinner is definitely sober and serious, but the one I tried, a Sirloin of Beef Dinner, actually tasted a lot like standard Swanson fare. Even the calorie count doesn't come out as expected: the Weight Watchers Sirloin of Beef Dinner weighed in at 560 calories, while a standard Swanson Spaghetti and Meatballs offering has only 323. At this point, though, I didn't really care about calories or chopped cauliflower — eating off a tin tray was getting depressing.

Day seven

I am on my last TV dinner, a Swanson Sliced Beef Dinner, and by this time I am in complete agreement with the disclaimer on the back of the box, "For good nutrition, eat a variety of foods." They mean, I assume, something more than just a variety of TV dinners, because after six of them, I can't do much more than pick at the different sections: the whipped potatoes, the peas and carrots, the apple cobbler. For a few minutes I consider turning the contents upside down on a real plate, to make it look more inviting. Then I have a better idea: I turn on the television. Marty Sender is interviewing a dolphin on *Evening Magazine*. I settle down in the chair, put the tin tray on my knee, and turn up the volume. The Sliced Beef Dinner is starting to taste better already. . . . □

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Chefs

Continued from page 7

when he did not cook. His earliest memories are of learning the intricacies and glories of Italian food from his mother and an aunt.

Apart from the plain hard work involved in good cooking, DiStasi believes that all food preparation is influenced by the environment, by the tenor of a kitchen and by the audience for whom one is cooking. "For example," he says, "when my mother remarried — to a man who actively disliked food — she slowly but surely became a wretched cook."

Being a good professional chef and restaurateur requires a temperament not unlike that of an artist, DiStasi believes: "Creativity and artistry cannot be achieved without either the loss of ego or, perhaps, the complete realization of the ego."

Indeed, the food at Front Street is a reflection of his own eclectic and creative tastes. Almost no dish can be described as Italian or French, and some of the unique combinations of spices and ingredients would send purists into fits of apoplexy. "Escoffier was a genius; but Escoffier is no longer valid in 1980," DiStasi says with finality. "I go by damned few rules, and when we branched out and opened in Boston (Front Street's parent establishment is in Provincetown), my main problem apart from serving novel food that tasted scintillating and fresh was to decide what would play in the city. Well, we abolished the distinction between 'ladies' and 'gentlemen' as far as the facilities were concerned. And we decided to be up-front and realistic about dress codes."

DiStasi pointed out that even a matter like establishing the tone of the service presents complications. "You have to decide. Do you want uniforms? Tuxedos? Dungarees? Nudity? Pretentiousness? Formality? We elected to go with clean, decent, knowledgeable service in neat, informal attire." The perfect match, as it turns out, for the striking decor and eclectic food at Front Street.

Given the availability of an undreamed-of abundance of decent ingredients, and the possibilities inherent in the judicious use of freezing, DiStasi is appalled at the junk and additives that go into many products. "I opened a can of clam chowder," he says, "and I was furious when I saw the list of artificial shit. Clam chowder is clams, onions, milk, cream, potatoes, and flour. Oh, yes, and butter."

As for the future, DiStasi says he hopes to see more local restaurants

Continued on page 30

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Continued from page 28
that are capable of marrying a commitment to quality with personal flair and inventiveness.

Bruce Frankel
Panache, 798 Main Street, Cambridge; 492-9500.

The proud owner and chef of Panache managed to avoid driving a taxi during the leanest years, but he did receive a bachelor's degree in social science and spent a number of years deeply entrenched in yoga, transcendental meditation, and macrobiotic foods. Since that regimen prohibited the use of wine, meat, and dairy products, Frankel says, his inventiveness was finely honed. "I acquired a real sense of proportion and discipline."

This experimental bent is still in evidence at Panache, where soups, meats, and sauces all bear the unique imprint of their creator. Occasionally a dish has an echo of the influence of vegetarian and Oriental foods of the chef's earlier years.

Like other young cooks, Frankel has worked at a variety of jobs at various times: busboy in a chain restaurant; sandwich man near BU; prep cook and *maitre d'* at Dodin-Bouffant; cook at Le Bocage. Finally, with a partner, he went into the scrimshaw business. Fortuitously, at the age of 21, Frankel was looking for work and tried Cafe L'Ananas, where Leo Romero hired him as a dishwasher. "I was a good dishwasher," Frankel muses, "but I soon discovered what mindless and enervating labor it is."

L'Ananas marked a turning point, and Frankel is open in paying his respect to Romero: "Leo can create off the top of his head better than most graduates of that famous local cooking school." When he became "acting chef" at L'Ananas, Frankel was, at about the same time, "seduced by roasted meats." At L'Ananas he met Margaret Farl (who is today Panache's outstanding pastry chef). He also took cooking classes at the Boston Center for Adult Education and studied calligraphy (which explains the beautiful, hand-lettered menus at Panache).

After six months in Paris, "mostly eating and learning a lot about the little touches and concept of service that make French restaurants so outstanding," Frankel returned to L'Ananas, this time as assistant *maitre d'*, in order to learn the front end of the business. Soon he was looking for a space to open his own restaurant. "I decided that I had to do it myself, and I believed that Boston desperately needed more boutique restaurants: independent, serious, dedicated efforts by individuals. Now there is such a group, and what most of us are doing is not competing with Boston's dinosaurs, but rather a series of unique endeavors."

Frankel believes that integrity, use of the finest possible fresh ingredients and continual self-criticism are the crucial features of the new wave: "Cooking is an ongoing, live process. The French (and Chinese) cuisines offer discipline and technique, but the French remains the most flexible and creative in devising a new, more digestible way of eating. Bocuse is already *passe*. Sure, I am familiar with *cuisine classique*; I can make a *roux* and a *sauce espagnol*, but I don't care about them. I think I have developed my own style. The restaurant business is draining, but it's something that I feel I have to do. At Panache I am expressing my idea of what food should be."

Moncef Meddeb
L'Espalier, 384 Boylston Street, Boston; 247-7406.

Moncef Meddeb and his partner, Donna Doll, who runs the dining room, agree: "We will not compromise on quality." But they sometimes differ on the meaning of quality. "Last week," says Meddeb, "I made a terrine of bluefish. Donna thought it was fine, but I didn't like it. Out it went."

Born of Tunisian parents in the Paris suburb of Bobigny, Meddeb re-

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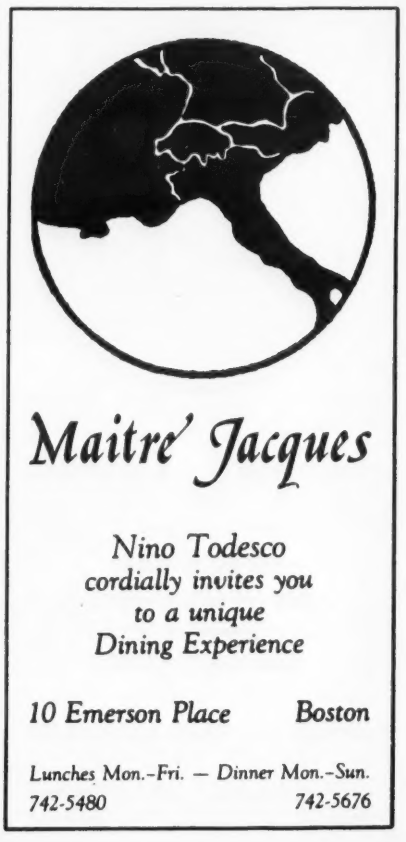

counts the pleasures of growing up in a neighborhood where the family could raise its own chickens and rabbits, cultivate a garden and enjoy the fruits from a dozen pear and apple trees that grew near the house. "There was an excellent bakery practically next door," Meddeb recalls. "I can still smell the *baguettes* as they came from the oven."

Meddeb's father was the principal cook in the family, and perhaps the first to teach his son an important lesson about French cookbooks: "They frequently either omit something — not necessarily an ingredient, but more often a crucial step — or they assume a certain level of technique that many a cook does not possess. Some of these gaps can be fatal to the recipes."

Meddeb came to this country and received a degree in political science from Harvard. Then he went to Tunisia and worked for four years in a bank. But the lure of cooking proved irresistible. He returned to this area, where, he says, "It was Sally Scoville of the original Bocage who rekindled my interest in becoming a professional restaurateur. By then I was ready. For I truly believe that a broad cultural background (not to mention business experience) is necessary both for cooking and for running a civilized restaurant."

For a time, Meddeb managed the Hamlet Coffee House in Harvard Square. "The experience was invaluable," he says, "because I literally had to supervise everything." Meddeb has also cooked at an establishment in Maine and, for four years, he managed and cooked at a place in Manchester, Massachusetts. "Having built up a business, the fears of opening our own restaurant were at least tolerable.

"No doubt about it," Meddeb says with a laugh. "This is a schizophrenic occupation. There is constant tension between the front (dining room) and the back (kitchens) of the house. Sometimes even the best kitchens run amok; sometimes inconsiderate customers foul up the works by appearing late for a reservation. Then we all suffer."

The winds of change in French cooking are as extraordinary as they are exciting in Meddeb's opinion. "Many establishments have not yet caught up with the new wave, either here or abroad. The new chefs in Boston have the potential to help the city and the region by introducing new tastes and laying to rest the notion that the city is a bad town for food. I like to take classic recipes — right now I'm experimenting with pheasant, for example — and transform them into the modern style. But some things mustn't change: if my menu says *sauce bordelaise*, you can bet that it is made with a decent red Bordeaux."

Robert Platner
Le Beau Geste, 147 Huron Avenue, Cambridge; 864-6670.

Robert Platner's grandparents owned and ran a restaurant in his home town of Syracuse, and in spite of their efforts to dissuade him from entering the trade, he seldom considered doing anything else. In the end, he received their blessings.

Still, for three years after he came to Boston, Platner's life followed a familiar pattern. Yes, he did drive a taxi, but he also worked as a carpenter and as a tree surgeon. He kept a hand in the food business by toiling intermittently at Ferdinand's and, later, the Blue Parrot.

Then Platner applied for admission to the Culinary Institute of America, in Hyde Park, and was accepted. He went for a look and found the size and style of the place unappealing. Instead, he entered another assembly-line culinary school, the Fanny Farmer, in Boston. "Three months later," he says, "I felt completely washed out, and I knew that I didn't belong in mass production."

The turning point for Platner came

Continued on page 32

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Continued from page 31
when he entered Kamman's Modern Gourmet school. Although he too found some parts of the regimen hard to endure, Platner says that it was Kamman, more than any other person, who opened his senses and altered his perception of what food should be. He was all the more disappointed, then, when Kamman didn't even acknowledge his invitation to come to Le Beau Geste for dinner when the restaurant opened, a year ago, on the premises of the original Bocage. (Since March, Platner has also been serving luncheon during the week, and the outdoor terrace behind the restaurant becomes a small Eden in warm weather.)

After Modern Gourmet, Platner cooked for six months at the Harvest Restaurant, in Harvard Square. (The Harvest may hold the local record for number of chefs per number of years in business, but such statistics are difficult to calculate.)

"I would never have learned about food costs and buying without my summer of cooking for the musicians at the Castle Hill Music Festival," Platner says. "I had to feed 75 people for $4.50 per person per day, and I learned in a hurry how to budget without cutting corners. Of course, the food was simple, but I think the quality was there for the price."

Like most of the cooks in the new wave, Platner prefers to make sauces with cream, butter, and simple reduction. "But I spent a lot of time in New Orleans," he says, "and I like to put Creole dishes on the menu. For some of them, a *roux* is essential."

Platner also likes to experiment with unusual ingredients. "Recently I have been cooking skate, a fish that has an undeserved bad reputation. And not long ago I served a raspberry hollandaise with lamb. It was terrible. But I discovered that the same sauce worked very well with Cornish hens. If a novelty fails, I cancel the idea. Still, it is important not to get into a rut. I'd go crazy having to handle a non-seasonal menu week after week."

Platner suggests that anyone thinking of opening a restaurant think twice. "The hours are long, and the margin of profit in a boutique operation is small. But for me it has become a personal matter, an organic process of developing my own pace and style. Every day I learn more about myself through cooking."

Lydia Shire
Cafe Plaza, Copley Plaza Hotel, Boston; 267-5300.

"Although both of my parents were commercial artists," says Shire, of the Cafe Plaza, "my father loved to cook. In our family, food was more important than clothing. I still remember my favorite Saturday-night dinner: spaghetti *ajo e ojo*, (or *aglio e olio*), with the aromas of fresh garlic and parsley. That would be followed by rare flank steak."

Shire was married shortly after she graduated from high school, and then had three children in rapid succession. "It was obvious that I *had* to cook. At first it was all from books, and I was terrified when I made my first veal stock for guests."

When she was still in her early 20s, Shire and her husband were divorced, and she decided that it was time to develop a career of her own. She baked a seven-layer chocolate cake and showed it to a pastry chef, who was impressed enough to send her to Jean-Paul Loric, soon to become the chef at Maison Robert. In the meantime, Shire supported herself by working as a cocktail waitress.

"When Maison Robert opened, I was hired for the pantry, to make salads," Lydia reports. "That lasted a month, because I simply wasn't ready for the pressures of a professional kitchen. So I decided to study at the Cordon Bleu school in London. Being in London helped almost as much as the professional training. When all is said and done, working is the best teacher, once

Continued on page 34

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Continued from page 32

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After London, Shire became a cook for a family in Los Angeles, "but California got to me," she says. Back to Boston and Maison Robert — but not to the pantry this time. Shire moved rapidly through the various stations and says that she learned a great deal about proper temperatures and the use of seasonings under the tutelage of Lucien Robert's nephew. She also began in earnest to make sauces from reductions instead of from *roux*.

From Maison Robert, Shire went to the Harvest. "They told me to come up with a veal special on my very first day," she says, "and I thought, 'Oh, my God.' But I think I became a more creative cook during my stay there — not only daily specials, but buying and butchering were my responsibility. I was really in charge for the first time."

Shire admits that she found it difficult to be the boss, disliked correcting other cooks when they made mistakes. Almost three years ago, Shire moved to the Cafe Plaza. Occasionally she dreams of running her own restaurant. Meanwhile, she is virtually doing that, in one sense: she is the boss of the kitchen that produces the food for the Copley Plaza's main dining room.

Shire insists on making her own veal stock and excels in the preparation of fish — with fresh tomatoes (in season), basil and bearnaise. She also enjoys playing with classic recipes and making them lighter. To her great satisfaction, the Cafe is expected to have a new kitchen and a more creative menu by July of this year. "New heights to scale," said Shire triumphantly.

Before we parted company, Shire taught me her method of braising Belgian endive. First-rate.

Sue Small

The Peacock, 5 Craigie Circle, Cambridge; 661-4073

Sue Small is also a student of the Cordon Bleu in London. "I recommend it highly to anyone," she says. "You acquire a good basic grounding from which to work." Small particularly liked the idea of working with a partner and being obliged to prepare a full meal every day after morning classes.

Born in Southampton, England, Small moved to London at the age of 15 and became first a nursery maid and subsequently a nanny to a family who also employed a French chef, Yvonne Cadiou. When the family moved to the United States, Cadiou stayed behind, and Small became the cook. (Only recently, Cadiou, now in her 70s, visited Small; she also continues to send occasional recipes.)

For a year, Small cooked at the Darien Inn in East Burke, Vermont; then she ran the Wine Bar, upstairs in the Garage, in Harvard Square. Two years ago, she and Joseph Stigliano purchased the restaurant on Craigie Circle. They've been doing a steady business ever since.

"All restaurants are collaborative efforts," Small insists, "unless you want to go crazy and burn yourself out in a very short time. I still find myself wanting to do everything and being frustrated when I realize I can't."

Besides her training at Cordon Bleu and in the kitchen with Yvonne Cadiou, Sue Small also pays tribute to Anne Willan, a highly respected teacher, author, editor, and food writer who spent a year in Cambridge. The two women became friends, and Small says that Willan offered many helpful suggestions on restaurant management and cooking.

"For me the advantage of running a boutique restaurant is that we can cater to the whims of our regular customers, warn someone that the soup is not quite up to snuff, and even refuse to serve a dish if it doesn't meet my standards," says Small. All of these are the perquisites that come with independence, and they are the things

Continued on page 36

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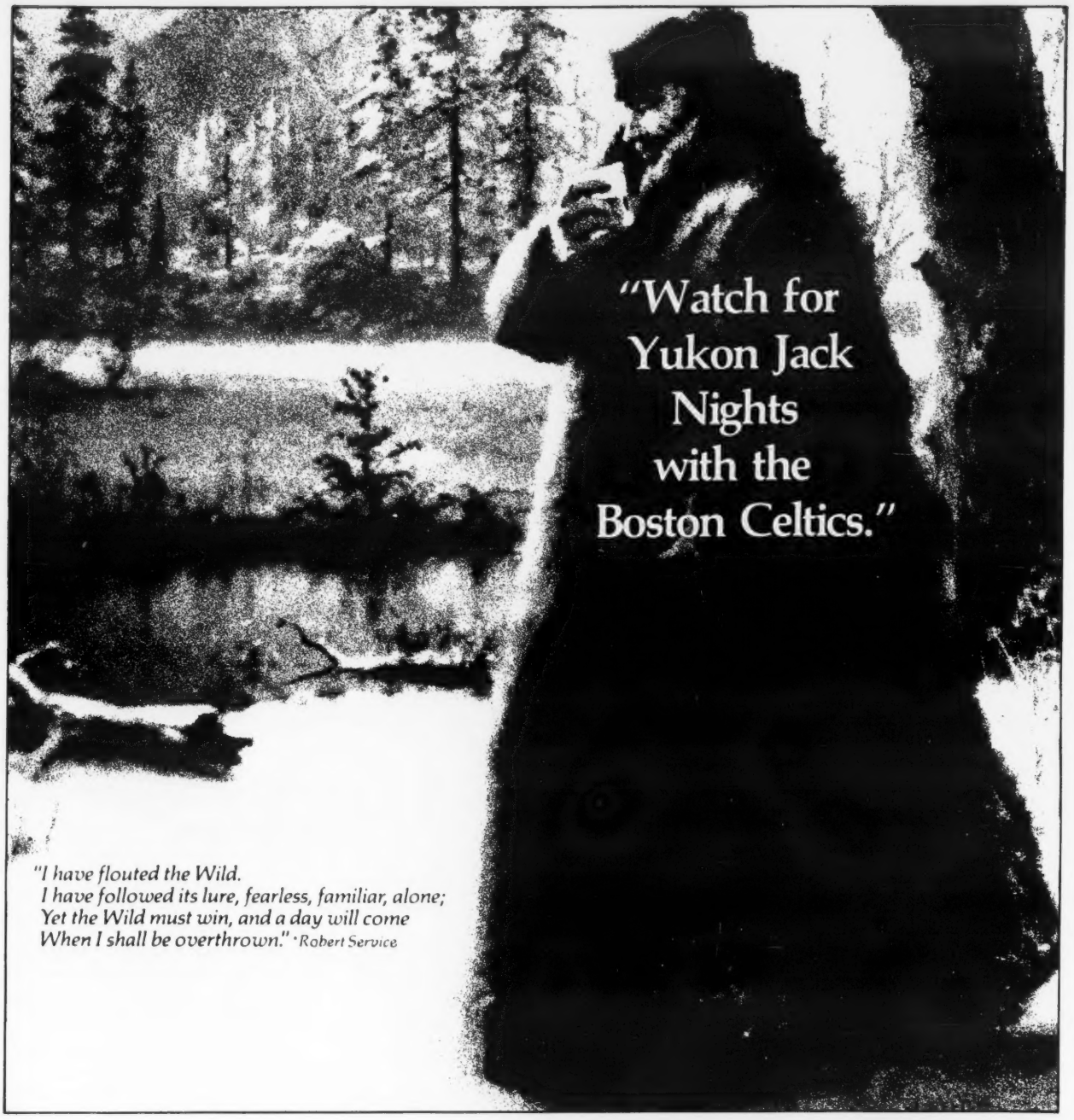
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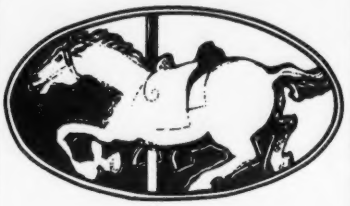

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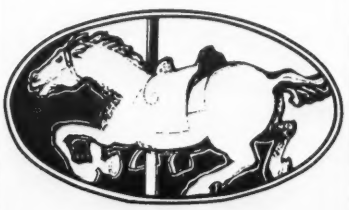

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that make the new restaurants so appealing.

Small's favorite bit of kitchen work is making pastry, "because you can see it going together bit by bit." And she thinks that good desserts are important because people eat them last, so they are apt to leave a lasting impression.

"I am delighted about the recent changes in Boston restaurants," says Small. "People who eat out have become more adventurous; when we serve rabbit now, it almost always sells out."

Small also took pleasure in reminiscing about the time she spent at a large English estate with its own gardener, gamekeeper, and dairyman. She worked with the housekeeper in planning menus for hunting parties.

That experience reminds her of a pet peeve: all the stuff and nonsense about *nouvelle cuisine*. "We were cooking *nouvelle* before *nouvelle* was invented," she states firmly. "Yvonne Cadiou and I were making sauces with heavy cream, enrichment butter, and reductions long before Bocuse had been heard from. Furthermore, there is nothing wrong with a good *roux* base for fish or chicken. I would never use it, however, for soups or sauteed meats."

According to her, "you really have to like the restaurant business in order to succeed. Many people don't seem to realize that a mere love of cooking and entertaining is not enough."

Maurie Warren
Le Bocage, 72 Bigelow Street, Watertown; 923-1210.

Maurie Warren, who is technically the steward at Enzo Danesi's Bocage, helps plan menus, does some of the buying for the restaurant, and serves as daytime prep and sauce cook. He also dreams of having his own place, even though a recent search failed to unearth a single suitable location.

While others were driving taxis, Warren was attending Harvard — off and on — and participating in the radical political movement of the late '60s. He lived with other students and friends in Mission Hill, and it was there that he began to cook. "I joined a book club, and my very first purchase was Julia Child Volume I. I can still remember my maiden voyage with her recipe for *boeuf bourguignon*."

Warren finally completed his degree in social studies at Harvard in 1973, and two years later he entered the cooking school at Modern Gourmet. "I consider the experience worth the money, and I received excellent training, although the course of study leaves many gaps in your knowledge and fails to teach you what you *don't*

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know." As for Kamman, Warren shares the opinion of David Coltin and others that "she was the most arrogant person I have ever met."

During his Harvard years, Warren did a stupefying stint at the original Orson Welles restaurant. After his year at Modern Gourmet, Warren got in touch with Enzo Danesi, who was in the process of taking over Bocage from Sally Scoville. Warren speaks highly of Danesi and of cook Freddy Figoli, who still works part-time at the restaurant and plays a crucial role in training new cooks.

Warren started at Bocage on the evening shift and as pantry man. Within a year, he had moved to the front of the kitchen and assumed major responsibilities at the various stations.

His radical background is evident when he discusses the comparatively humane organization of labor at Bocage: instead of the customary grind, the staff rotates stations, and seldom is anyone obliged to work for more than 43 hours a week. "Because Enzo has established good central control, the restaurant runs smoothly — with shared responsibility — and offers a fine opportunity to learn every aspect of the trade. Our menu has a basic structure to it, and any new dish that is added must be molded to fit into that structure."

While Warren believes that there is less ferocious competition among the chefs of the new wave than among the old, he also thinks that too many young cooks are Kamman clones or Scoville clones, too closely tied to their mentors' respective styles. "It is not enough simply to recapitulate what has already been done," says Warren.

"I don't recommend the restaurant business to anyone," he says — but there is the hint of a smile when he says it. Warren, of course, has no intention of leaving the trade. "The problem," he adds, "is that most people don't understand that running a restaurant is primarily a hustle for everyone except those who actually do the hard work of cooking. Restaurant food production is not ART, like Madeleine or Matisse; it is commercial art for profit, like the guy who draws the ads."

Warren hopes that the "reactionary cult of the chef-owner" that prevails in France — Bocuse, Guerard — "will not take root in the United States." As he explains it, "any restaurant is a joint effort, and no single person should be allowed to take all the credit for its success." Warming to his subject, Warren asks: "Do you realize that 43 percent of the families with at least one member employed in the restaurant business have an annual income of less than $12,000?" □

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